Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Review

Consultation Questions and Answers

The Chair of the Australian Qualifications Framework Review, Professor Peter Noonan, has answered the following questions from preliminary consultations.

This document may be updated with additional questions during the consultation period.

General

1. *Why do we need a national qualifications framework?*

National qualifications frameworks (or systems) operate in many countries. Their primary role is to clearly define the types of qualifications and the level and characteristics of formal qualifications issued by accredited education and training providers in the form of outcomes learners should achieve. They allow the range of qualifications within a country to be considered as a whole, including the relationship and distinctions between qualifications. They assist in making comparisons with qualifications issued in other countries and even across regions.

Qualifications frameworks should provide transparency and consistency within education and training systems and for external users. In Australia, the AQF is now widely used as a reference point for regulation and quality assurance in both sectors of tertiary education and by a wide range of external organisations whose roles include the use or recognition of qualifications.

Qualifications frameworks are, of necessity, general in nature. They do not prescribe the content and specific outcomes of individual qualifications and their effectiveness is highly dependent on the policies and practices that apply within and across the sectors of Australian education and in individual institutions. However, unless the framework that underpins these qualifications is relevant, contemporary and useable it will either constrain improvement and innovation in qualifications or more likely be largely ignored.

Enterprise and Social Skills

2. *There has been a lot of commentary recently on the importance of Enterprise and Social Skills, otherwise known as Future Skills or 21st Century Skills. Can you describe the approach the panel's discussion paper has taken on this issue?*

While there is general agreement about the importance of the personal attributes and capabilities required for the current and emerging labour market, there are very different views about what those attributes and capabilities should be. They are also likely to change.

The AQF is a general framework that does not prescribe the content of individual qualifications.

There are millions of students of different ages and backgrounds undertaking hundreds of very different qualifications of different levels, lengths and purposes across thousands of education and training institutions and in very different learning contexts.

The approach suggested by the Panel in the Discussion Paper is that social and enterprise skills should be acquired and assessed in the context of the requirements of individual qualifications and, as such, the AQF should not prescribe a universal or mandatory set of social and enterprise skills across qualifications.

However, through consultations and submissions, the Panel wants to test whether there is benefit in developing and maintaining a set of social and enterprise skills (including definitions) that could be referenced and applied in the development of individual qualifications – or other approaches. This, in turn, would ensure that the AQF was positioned as a framework for the 21st century where clearly more than just content knowledge and technical competence is required.

Duplication in the AQF descriptors

3. *There is both duplication and contradiction between the AQF level learning outcome criteria and the qualification type learning outcome descriptors. Have you considered how this could be addressed?*

The approach suggested by the Panel is to transition to a single levels framework and then to align each qualification type and its descriptors against those levels – this would be simpler and remove duplication and potential inconsistencies. It is also more consistent with international practice.

The AQF Taxonomy

4. *The AQF level learning outcome criteria are based on three key typologies:*
   - *Knowledge*
   - *Skills*
   - *Application of Knowledge and Skills (competency)*

   Sometimes it seems the criteria do not relate to the competencies required in an ever-changing workplace. Will you address this problem?

The Discussion Paper challenges the assumption that the *application* of skills and knowledge rises in direct alignment with the *level* of skills and knowledge. For example, is it reasonable to assume that all Certificate III graduates, including qualified tradespeople, only apply their skills and knowledge *'by taking limited responsibility in known and stable contexts within established parameters'* or that they take only *'limited responsibility for the output of others'* as the AQF currently suggests?

We want to test this issue during the consultations and through submissions and look at alternative approaches, perhaps by separating application of knowledge and skills into a separate domain which is less hierarchical in nature and which could be flexibly applied across different qualification types depending on their purpose.

Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE)

5. *The last review of the AQF proposed aligning the SSCE to a certain level in the framework, how is the discussion paper's approach different?*

The Panel looked at options to assign the SSCE to a single level but the range of learning requirements and outcomes clearly span a range of AQF levels. We then considered whether the SSCE could be aligned at a number of levels but this approach assumes that a full level outcome would be achieved through the SSCE – not only is this unlikely but it would vary according the subject selection of individual students. The approach we have suggested is to recognise that

learning outcomes vary across the SSCE and that trying to integrate the SSCE more directly into the AQF given its broad purpose and flexible structure is not possible.

The Panel is interested in placing greater emphasis on the role of the SSCE in providing the skills needed for work and pathways into tertiary education rather than the current focus on ranking students for selection to higher education. Those roles need not be mutually exclusive, for example, if tertiary providers look more to students' individual subjects and achievement levels to support direct pathways (including with credit) into tertiary courses.

Shorter Form Credentials

6. A *number of qualifications frameworks internationally are starting to recognise shorter form credentials, often referred to as micro-credentials. What approach do you think the AQF could take?*

Shorter form credentials already exist in many forms and have been provided by a wide range of organisations including tertiary education providers and even schools. Other types of short form credentials responding to rapid changes in technology and the labour market are under development.

The AQF cannot and should not seek to incorporate or accommodate the wide array of credentials as new types of qualifications requiring wholesale changes to the AQF. The focus of the AQF should remain on full qualifications. However, in the context of renewed focus on the importance of lifelong learning and rapid reskilling, the key issue is whether or not the AQF (and other international frameworks) should provide guidance on how shorter form credentials could be recognised within the AQF levels framework – for example, as providing a learning outcome at a particular AQF level – for the purposes of credit recognition – and then applying the processes for quality assurance of qualifications in the schools, VET and higher education sectors to provide formal recognition of the shorter form credential.

This would enable shorter form credentials to be more easily recognised across sectors and providers and included in, or linked to, full qualifications.

However, decisions in this area must be driven by learner needs and the intent and purpose of the credentials and the providers offering them and not by an intent to expand the regulatory scope of the AQF where it is not required.

Credit Points

7. *Why is the AQF Review panel considering an optional AQF credit point system? What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages?*

Many national qualifications frameworks include credit point systems linked to qualifications to assist with credit recognition between qualifications and for the purposes of accumulation of credit by individuals, particularly towards full qualifications.

As the AQF was developed as a loose and largely sector based qualification system, it has not included a credit point system. Instead, broad measures of the 'volume of learning' are used which largely reflect historical practice and which provide no useful guidance to providers or learners about the amount of credit the qualification signals.

The approach suggested by the Panel for testing through consultations and submissions is to develop an optional credit point system that providers could use as a benchmark, like a system of 'currency exchange'.

The advantage of this approach is that it should assist individuals and providers to assess levels of credit recognition across qualifications. However, it is essential to note that credit points can only be automatically applied where the learner meets the learning outcomes or competencies required for credit to be given.

The disadvantage of the approach is that it might be overly complex to administer, particularly if the credit points system was to apply at the individual unit or module level.